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“Shopping in a Size Small World”: Examining Attributes of Mainstream Retail Clothing  
Stores that Affect the Level of Satisfaction in Plus-Size Female Consumers

By

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Bachelor of Arts  
Columbia College 2009

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Retailing in

Retailing

College of Hospitality, Retail, and Sport Management

University of South Carolina

2014

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## ABSTRACT

The plus-size female U.S. consumer accounts for 28% of the apparel purchasing power. They are a disgruntled group of women who state that fashion retailers do not understand their clothing needs. Additionally, there is a limited amount of information on how this demographic is affected by the environment of a retail store. The purpose of this study is to examine the attributes of mainstream retail clothing store shopping environments which affect the satisfaction and dissatisfaction of plus-size female consumers which include: (a) Crowding, (b) Mannequins, (c) Clothing Availability, (d) In-Store Signage, (e) Sales Associates, and (f) Fitting Rooms. Results of the study reveal that clothing availability, spatial ambiance, and mannequins significantly influence plus-size women's level of satisfaction with the store's shopping environment. Sales associates and human crowding were also found to significantly influence their level of satisfaction with the human environment of the store. These findings add to the limited research on plus-size women's satisfaction. In addition, they solidify the importance of clothing availability as the key issue surrounding plus-size women's needs and wants in a retailer, and that this need continues to be unsatisfied.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides some justification for the topics that will be explored in this study. The following issues will be discussed: (1) Global Obesity, (2) Overweight and Obese Americans, and (3) The Plus-Size Market.

#### 1.1 Global Obesity

A 2008, report found that globally “more than 1.4 billion adults, 20 and older, were overweight. Of these, over 200 million men and nearly 300 million women were obese” (“Obesity and Overweight,” 2013). Individuals who are overweight are defined as having “body mass index (BMI) of 25 or greater” and those with a “BMI of 30 or above [are] obese” (“Nearly Two Billion,” 2013). The rising rates of overweight and obese people are due to a number of contributing factors such as larger portion sizes, a lack of physical activity, genetics, and other health problems which can cause weight gain (“What Causes Overweight,” 2012). Researchers indicate that these problems came about in part because of globalization which is “the inexorable spread of knowledge, technology, culture, and capital from country to country” (“Globalization,” n.d.). For example, many countries such as China have adapted to Westernized ways of eating that include drinks high in sugar and high calorie fast foods. In fact, obesity rates have climbed so high, some countries have taken the initiative to curb the problem of obesity



by placing higher taxes on junk foods, which has helped somewhat, though researchers state this problem is one that will take time and effort to change (Harless, 2012).

## 1.2 Overweight and Obese Americans

The number of overweight and obese individuals in America is on the rise. By the year 2022 an estimated “81 million people [will] be overweight and 113 million obese” (“Obesity to Affect,” 2013). These rising statistics are concerning because of the potential health problems that may arise from being overweight or obese, such as heart disease, stroke, and diabetes (“What Causes Overweight,” 2012). Another cause for concern is the rising health care costs that stem from being overweight or obese, which “researchers have estimated that by 2030 could rise by \$48 to \$66 billion a year in the U.S.” (“Economic Costs,” n.d.).

Other than health problems, weight discrimination is an issue that many overweight and obese individuals in America face. An example of the social stigma against this demographic was featured in a Newsweek magazine article by Hecht “warning ‘fatties’ not to tell themselves ‘you don’t look so bad,’ [because] you do” (as cited in Lewis, Cash, Jacobi, & Bubbl-Lewis, 1997, p. 297). The researchers in this study also note that these comments are an example of the “existence of a socially acceptable prejudice toward fat people” which is still present in our society today (Lewis, et al. 1997, p. 297). Although studies have shown that both men and women experience weight discrimination, women are believed to experience more (King & Puhl, n.d.). Some scholars (e.g., King & Puhl, n.d.; Yoquinto, 2012) suggest that this is due to society’s beliefs that being thin represents how attractive a person is. One report indicates that weight discrimination can take place in a number of places which include: “places of

employment, educational institutions, medical facilities, the mass media, interpersonal relationships” and “stores which do not carry clothing in large sizes” (“Obesity, Bias, and Stigmatization,” n.d.).

### 1.3 The Plus-Size Market

Plus-size clothing for women starts at size 14, which is the average size worn by women in the United States (Bogenrief, 2012). According to Binkley (2013), this segment of the apparel market holds 28% of the purchasing power; however, they only spend 17%. Consumers in this market are unhappy with the selection of clothes that they have to choose from. Retailers have been accused of providing unflattering clothes which have been made to intentionally conceal their bodies. An article by the Associated Press (2013) stated, “ ‘many think ‘Oh, she doesn't want to draw attention, live life, date, be confident, wear fitted clothes with bold colors and patterns,’ when the exact opposite is true.” Many will, instead, purchase accessories such as shoes and handbags, which adds to Bogenrief’s (2012) claim that “this consumer base has essentially been trained to make do with limited options, resulting in plus-sized women purchasing less clothing”. Retailers argue that limited floor space and budget are reasons for not providing plus-size clothing. Additionally, it has been suggested that plus-size clothing is too expensive to make because of the extra fabric required to make garments (Clifford, 2010). There is a misconception in the retail industry that plus-size consumers are disinterested in fashion and that they do not spend money on clothes, which fuels the decision by retailers to lessen the offerings for this demographic (Wilson, 2011).

#### 1.4 Purpose of this Study

The purpose of this study is to examine attributes of mainstream retail clothing store shopping environments which affect the satisfaction and dissatisfaction of plus-size female consumers which include: (1) Crowding, (2) Mannequins, (3) Clothing Availability, (4) In-Store Signage, (5) Sales Associates, and (6) Fitting Rooms.

#### 1.5 Definitions

**Clothing availability**- the insufficient access to stylish clothing that fits properly.

**Fat talk**- “women (typically peers) engaging in mutual disparagement about the size and shape of their bodies” (Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011, p. 18).

**Human crowding**-“the number of individuals and rate and extent of social interaction among the people in the store” (Machleit et al., 2000, p. 30).

**In-store signage**-“product and promotional stimuli to which consumers are exposed [to] in the store” (Bawa, Landwehr, and Krishna, 1989, p.472).

**Mainstream retail clothing stores**- non-specialty clothing stores.

**Perceived crowding**-“a psychological state that occurs when a person’s demand for space exceeds the supply” (as cited in Machleit, Eroglu & Mantel, 2000, p.30).

**Plus-size women**- female consumers who wear a size 14 or larger (Scaraboto and Fischer, 2012).

**Purchase intention**-“the likelihood that a customer will buy a particular product” (Wang & Tsai, 2014).

**Sales associate**- an individual who assists customers with their purchasing decisions and are responsible for driving the sales of a retail store (Cho, 2001).

**Satisfaction**-“the consumer’s fulfillment response. It is a judgment that a product/service feature, or the product or service itself, provided (or is providing) *a pleasurable* level of consumption-related fulfillment, including levels of under-or over fulfillment” (Oliver, 1997, p.8).

**Spatial Crowding**-“The number of nonhuman elements [in a retail store], such as merchandise and fixtures” which limit the amount of space available to shop (Machleit, Eroglu, & Mantel, 2000, p. 30).

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This exploratory study will examine attributes of mainstream retail clothing store shopping environments, which affect the satisfaction and dissatisfaction of plus-size female consumers. This chapter will discuss the following: (1) Crowding, (2) Mannequins, (3) Clothing Availability, (4) In-Store Signage, (5) Sales Associates, and (6) Fitting Rooms

#### 2.1 Crowding

Consumers in a crowded retail store often experience what Stokols refers to as “perceived crowding”, “a psychological state that occurs when a person’s demand for space exceeds the supply” (as cited in Machleit, Eroglu, & Mantel, 2000, p. 30). Kazakeviciute and Banyte (2012) have identified two dimensions of perceived crowding, spatial and human, which have been linked to a consumer’s dissatisfaction with a retail store. According to Machleit spatial crowding refers to “the number of nonhuman elements [in a retail store], such as merchandise and fixtures” which limit the amount of space available to shop (Machleit, Eroglu, & Mantel, 2000, p. 30). Li, Kim, & Lee (2009), suggest that a way to mitigate the negative feelings which may arise from spatial crowding is to provide a store layout that is functional, while also allowing consumers to shop freely. A study conducted by Owen (2012) provides a logical explanation as to why spatial crowding may effect plus-size consumers. This study attempted “to use

information from interviews, personal journals, and ethnographic research to explore how fat persons experience and navigate their daily spatial worlds” (Owen, 2012, p. 290). Respondents of this study stated that shopping can be difficult, because public spaces have not been made to accommodate larger bodies.

In contrast to spatial crowding, human crowding, “the number of individuals as well as the rate and extent of social interaction among people in a given environmental setting”, has proven to provide either a positive or negative shopping experience for consumers (Machleit et al., 2000, p. 30). A minimal amount of research has been conducted on the positive aspects of human crowding, though a study conducted by Byun and Mann (2011) found that a competitive retail environment can elicit positive emotions such as joy, excitement, and thrill” in consumers (p. 293).

Machleit et al (2000), also researched human crowding and how it may affect a consumers shopping experience. Their research indicates that a “high social density may lead to undesirable outcomes such as lack of privacy or personal territory resulting in heightened feelings of being crowded” (p. 30). A study by Izard supports these findings and also propose that crowding may evoke “feelings of shyness (or shame)” when a person feels that the attention in a crowded environment has been directed toward them (as cited in Machleit et al., 2000, p. 31). A study by Harrell, Hutt and Anderson (2009) also warn that a crowded retail environment, can be so difficult for a consumer to deal with that they may spend less money than initially planned or leave a store empty handed (as cited in Noone and Matilla, 2009).

The studies on human crowding do not pertain specifically to the plus-size market. There is a minimal amount of information on how plus-size consumers are

affected by human crowding; however, there is sufficient evidence that overweight and obese individuals are negatively affected while in a public setting, generally. For instance, a number of media stories have covered “fat shaming”, “an act of bullying, singling out, discriminating, or making fun of a fat person”, in public places (Long, 2013). Bahadur (2013) makes reference to the issue of fat shaming in a recent article which reported on a social experiment conducted by college professor Hailey Morris-Cafiero, who began documenting her own social experiment, “Wait Watchers”, in order to capture the expressions strangers made toward her while out in public. Morris-Cafiero came up with the idea for this experiment after looking through photographs of herself, and noticing strangers in the background who appeared to not only be staring, but laughing at her appearance. These photos prompted Morris-Cafiero, with the help of an assistant, to begin photographing herself in public settings doing normal activities including: “reading, sketching, and talking on the phone” (Bahadur, 2013). Morris-Cafiero also made sure to capture photos of herself eating foods such as ice cream or donuts in public or swimming at the local pool, all which she felt would garner an expression from strangers. This social experiment received a moderate amount of media attention, with some critics stating that Morris-Cafiero was being arrogant in thinking that all of the subjects in her photographs were mocking her weight. She responded in saying "I think some people are just reacting to the way I look. And I do think some people are reacting to me being photographed... I don't presume that they all think I'm fat. But at the same time, for that one little fraction of a second, there's a physical reaction to me doing what I'm doing." (Bahadur, 2013). Others however, have praised Morris-

Cafiero for her efforts in bringing attention to an issue which some state is a daily hindrance (Miller, 2013).

While Scholars have proved that crowding does effect the shopping behaviors of consumers in general, studies have not focused specifically on plus-size consumers. The information on how this group is effected by crowding is limited. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct exploratory studies on plus-size consumers which will be helpful to retailers in their attempt to create a comfortable retail environment for all of their customers.

## 2.2 Mannequins

Previous studies suggest that mannequins (lifelike displays that promote merchandise) have an influence on the purchase intentions of consumers. For example, Fister (2009) reports that a study conducted by Kerfoot, Davies, & Ward showed that “customers preferred seeing mannequins in a visual display because it enabled them to picture the garment on themselves (reducing perceived risk), which in turn stimulates browsing, and influences multiple purchases.” (p. 20). These findings are also consistent with a survey conducted by the NPD Group which found that “Forty-two percent of customers say something on a mannequin influences whether they buy it. In fact, mannequins ranked just behind friends and family in terms of influence.” (as cited in D’Innocenzio, 2014). While there is information that mannequins can effect consumers’ purchase intentions, the studies so far have been exploratory and there is a limited amount of information available. Also, a lot of the information that exists has focused on the positive influences of mannequin displays, and less on the negatives, such as the size of mannequins which recently has been a topic of discussion in the media. For instance,



Whisenhunt suggests that “Anytime [a consumer sees] clothing on [a] mannequin, or model there's pressure to look like them and fit into the clothes” (as cited in Meidierks-Lenham, 2007). This points to a gap in the literature, which this current study will contribute to by exploring how plus-size female consumers are effected by mannequin displays in mainstream retail clothing stores.

When mannequins first appeared in the windows of retail stores, they had a more life-like appearance and represented a variety of different body types (Wallis, 2014). As time passed, they began to take on a different appearance with many donning “tiny, defined waistlines, rounded hips, high, pert busts and sloping shoulders,” and most recently, they have appeared with “a toned body narrow hips and a straight shoulder line” (Wallis, 2014). Meidierks-Lenham (2007) notes that the changes in mannequins appearance is due to “body image trends” in society, and the more mannequins deviate from the realistic female form, the more it is likely to effect the self-esteem of young women.

Recently, some retailers have strayed away from the typical U.S mannequin that “[ranges] from a size 2 to a size 6” and are 5-ft 10-in in order to appeal to their female consumers who on average wear a U.S size 14 and are about 5-ft 4-in (Luscombe, 2013). For instance, some U.S retailers have invested in more life-like mannequins who wear wigs, makeup, have back fat, and tattoos, all which has been done in order to give consumers a realistic image of how clothing may appear on their body (D`Innocenzio, 2014). These changes have been recognized the most in the UK retail clothing store Debenhams, who introduced plus-size mannequins into their stores in order to “better represent real women’s shapes”(Barnett, 2013). The retailer notes that its decision came

about after realizing that its size ten mannequins were not reflective of their average female consumer, who is a size 16. Another retailer in Sweden named Åhléns, also made headlines after a picture of a full-figured mannequin, which had been displayed in their store years prior, was posted on Facebook and soon went viral (Bindley, 2013). The photo was praised by many and launched a discussion on social media about body image and the influence that mannequin displays may have on consumers.

So far, the studies that have been conducted on mannequins have been exploratory. It is necessary that more studies be conducted in order to provide useful information to retailers on the benefits of using mannequins that accurately represent the consumers who shop in their stores.

### 2.3 Clothing Availability

Few studies have focused specifically on plus-size women and their experiences shopping; however, the information that does exist suggests that clothing availability which refers to the insufficient access to stylish clothing that fits properly, is the cause of dissatisfaction among women in this group. One study explored the blog posts of plus-size women over the course of three years, with the intent of “identifying why [these] consumers become engaged in seeking greater inclusion in a market and on the institutional work they engage in when doing so” (Scraboto & Fischer, 2012). One particular post on a blog site entitled “Two Whole Cakes” stated:

When I [damage] my clothes in some way, I tend to panic about it a little bit. . . . This, my friends, is a side effect of living with style scarcity. Because I really don’t have any reason to believe I’d find something like the dress [that is torn] ever again. Now, no longer being in possession of a particular dress is not exactly a hardship; certainly not on the level of not having a place to live or enough to eat. But the panic bubbles up anyway, because I can’t just run to Anthropologie

or H&M or where-ever the ladies several sizes down from me do their shopping and pick up another. Fat style is a scarce resource (as cited in Scaraboto & Fisher, 2012).

This post highlights that plus-size consumers are frustrated with the lack of clothing options provided by the mainstream retail market, and that they feel neglected by retailers.

The NPD group conducted a survey on plus-size women and found that 63% “report shopping for plus sized clothing is more stressful than shopping for regular clothing” (NPD, 2012). Additionally, this survey uncovered that 62% of plus-size women have a hard time finding the style of clothing they desire and 56% report that finding clothing in the quality that is offered to women who wear standard sizes is difficult (NPD, 2012). While there are clothing stores that cater specifically to plus-size women, many state that they desire to shop in mainstream retail clothing stores, which offer both plus-size and non-plus size clothing (Mintel, 2012). In fact, a survey of plus-size women found retailers such as “Walmart (47% of plus size women shop for clothing at Walmart), Kohl’s (37%), and JCPenney (35%) are favored over plus size specialists” because consumers are able to purchase a variety of items within other product categories (Mintel, 2012). Although these retailers were found to be more favorable, women in this survey reported that they felt these stores cater more specifically to women who wear standard sizes. In fact, 50% of the respondents reported that “if they [cannot] find clothes to buy, they end up buying something else such as (cosmetics, jewelry, etc.)” in order to compensate for the lack of clothing available (Bogenrief, 2012; Mintel, 2012). Forty-Seven % also stated when they are unable to find anything in their size they are likely to leave a store empty-handed (Mintel, 2012). This proves that even though mass merchandisers and department stores are favorable among plus-size women because they

provide some clothing options, these retailers are still neglecting this demographic, and their decision to cater to the plus-size market is one that has not been properly executed.

A great example of this is the retailer Target, which has attempted to provide better clothing options for plus-size women, recently received negative media attention because of events that sparked dismay with women who are plus-size. The first incident involved a grey dress offered in both standard and plus-sizes. The color of the standard sized dress was given the name “dark heather grey”, while the plus-size dress was referenced as “manatee grey” (Murray, 2013). Target issued an apology calling the color choice a “discrepancy”, and that the color manatee grey is a common color choice for products featured in their stores. Consumers on social media voiced their dismay with this incident and stated that they felt insulted. A similar event happened months later when the retailer featured a dress in its online plus-size section on a pregnant model (Willingham, 2014). Target once again issued an apology for the mistake, stating that it was an “unfortunate oversight” (Krupnick, 2014). This story also launched a discussion about the maternity section in Target stores which are often mistaken for plus-size clothing, because the two sections are side by side (Willingham, 2014). These incidents suggest that while retailers are attempting to make significant changes to tap into the plus-size market it might be useful to re-evaluate the problems which they are presently encountering.

A study by Otieno, Harrow, & Lea-Greenwood (2005), explored the satisfaction and dissatisfaction of plus-size female consumers in the UK; women of all sizes were surveyed about the satisfaction and dissatisfaction with clothes and the retail store environment. The findings of this study indicate that consumers of all ages and sizes are

dissatisfied with retail clothing stores, but plus-size consumers are the most dissatisfied. Consumers in this demographic were unable to “find clothes they perceived as fashionable, which were a good fit and were affordable, in an environment, which does not make them, feel second-class to their thinner sisters” (Otieno et al., 2005, p. 307). The findings of this study signify to both retailers and manufacturers that plus-size women are dissatisfied with poor clothing options and improper clothing fit, and that this is an area that must be improved in order to satisfy these consumers. There is a need for further exploratory research on clothing availability and how it affects plus-size female consumers in the United States. These studies are needed in order to provide retailers with information on this demographic, who accounts for a significant amount of purchasing power in the United States, and their shopping behaviors.

#### 2.4 In-Store Signage

Retail stores commonly use in-store signage (product and promotional stimuli to which consumers are exposed [to] in the store) to promote the merchandise sold in their stores (Bawa, Landwehr, & Krishna, 1989, p. 472). Signage is relied upon by retailers because it not only allows them to be creative in the ways in which they persuade consumers to buy merchandise, but it also allows them to “reinforce [their] identity to consumers and re-expose them to new ideas and targeted products” (Ruderman, & Ruderman, 1998, p. 9). There is a limited amount of research that has focused on in-store signage and how it affects plus-size consumers, though the information that exists found that it can have a negative impact on consumers in general because of the unrealistic body types shown. For example, one study suggests that consumers with low body esteem will engage in social comparison while shopping in clothing stores with “giant

wall-sized ads [that show] beautiful people wearing” the clothes they sell (Dahl, Argo, & Morales, 2012, p. 868).

Recently, the UK retailer Debenhams banned airbrushed advertisements from their stores, after viewing the “publication of several studies suggesting that school girls want to lose weight partly because of the portrayal of women in ads” (Bold, 2013). In addition to this, the retailer also launched a campaign using models of all ages “to showcase the range of sizes and labels” available in their stores (London, 2013). The U.S clothing retailer American Eagle also launched a similar campaign for its lingerie line named Aerie, which shows models in their natural state with stretch marks, tattoos, and birthmarks (Dockterman, 2014). While these retailers have made positive steps toward encouraging women to embrace their bodies, the false representation that the media has created about the female body poses a challenge to their efforts (Serdar, 2005). In fact, the media’s beliefs have turned into what a majority of women view as the social norm, and has caused an obsession among women to achieve the “perfect body”. However, research by Hawkins suggests that the models featured in advertisements are “15% below the average weight of women,” which makes achieving this ideal body type virtually impossible (as cited in Tucci & Peters, 2005, p. 521).

Two studies (e.g., Harper & Tiggemann, 2008; Perrier, 2008) provide sufficient evidence that the body size of models in advertisements have an effect on women. The first study found that when women are exposed to idealized body images they feel negatively about their own bodies (Harper & Tiggemann, 2008). Conversely, the second study conducted by Holmstrom, showed that when exposed to advertisements with plus-size models, women “had a positive shift in the perception of their own body image,

possibly because of downward social comparison” (as cited in Perrier, 2008, p. 8). While both of these studies do not focus on in-store signage specifically, they provide sufficient evidence that women are effected by the models featured in advertisements.

Further exploratory research must be conducted on in-store signage in order to determine the extent to which it affects consumers. This study will explore how in-store signage effects plus-size consumers level of satisfaction with mainstream retail clothing stores. Retailers may benefit from the findings of this current study because it may provide them with information that will be useful in their attempts to market toward this demographic.

## 2.5 Sales Associates

Sales associates, (assist consumers with their purchasing decisions and are responsible for driving the sales of a retail store) are essential to a retail store because they can affect the purchase intentions of consumers (Cho, 2001, p. 2). Cho (2001) indicates that “in apparel research, few studies have investigated the influence of the sales [associate]” (p. 20). However, a study conducted by Shim & Kotsiopoulos showed that “friendliness, availability, product knowledge, and appearance are important characteristics of a sales [associate]” (as cited in Cho, 2001, p. 20). Other studies (e.g., Kim, Ju, & Johnson, 2009; Naylor & Frank, 2000) have explored these characteristics and how they affect consumers in general, but few have focused specifically on plus-size women. One study conducted by Otieno, Harrow, & Lea-Greenwood (2005) on plus-size female consumers and their retail experiences found the same type of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with sales associates as all other consumers. Even still, there is a minimal amount of information on whether this demographic experiences higher levels of

dissatisfaction with sales associates than any other group of consumers. There is reason to believe that plus-size consumers have a more dissatisfying shopping experience, and because of this it is necessary to explore how sales associates may affect their shopping behaviors.

Customer service, (assistance and other resources that a company provides to the people who buy or use its products or services) provided to plus-size consumers is one possible reason which may cause a more dissatisfying shopping experience (“Customer Service,” n.d.). For instance, a recent article on plus-size blogger Nicollete Mason, which was featured in the Huffington Post, detailed that size discrimination is present in retail stores (Persad, 2014). In the article, Mason spoke of her retail shopping experiences, which have been both negative and positive, and recounted one negative yet memorable shopping experience involving a sales associate stating:

I had one bad experience in the West Village where I was looking for this See by Chloé dress. I knew it went up to a size 14, and I knew that they had it at Bloomingdales, but I lived in the West Village and I saw it in the window of this boutique. But when I went in and asked for it, they said, "We only stock it up to a size 8." I was like, "Well that's ridiculous. The brand makes a full size going up to a 14, can you order it?" And they replied, "No, we can't do that, I'm sorry. This isn't the right place for you." (as cited in Persad, 2014).

Mason also stated that it is because of experiences such as these that she elects to shop online instead of a retail store where she is likely to be ignored by salespeople who discriminate against her because of her size (Persad, 2014).



Lozano (2005) reports that a study conducted by Rice University explored the level of customer service that plus-size female shoppers encountered. The study was conducted in three phases, where the first two were manipulated by the researchers to elicit a response from sales associates (Lozano, 2005). Phase used participants from two groups of consumers. The first were “casually and professionally dressed average-weight shoppers”, and the second consisted of participants who, with the help of prosthetics posed as “casually and professionally dressed, obese shoppers” (Lozano, 2005). In this phase, obese shoppers reported subtle forms of discrimination, which included “less eye contact, more rudeness, hostility and unfriendliness” (Lozano, 2005). In the second phase, average-sized shoppers and those posing as obese shoppers were still used, but participants were given either a diet soda or a milkshake to hold and while engaging with sales associates and they were asked to mention “whether or not they were trying to lose weight” (Lozano, 2005). The results of this phase uncovered that obese shoppers carrying the high-calorie milkshakes “reported the greatest amount of discrimination” from sales associates (Lozano, 2005). Finally, phase three included 191, women who were not used in the previous stages of the study and they were asked about their retail experiences. Obese women stated that they felt discriminated against and because of this they “spent less time and money in the store and would probably not return” (Lozano, 2005). Although this study found only subtle forms of discrimination from sales associates toward obese shoppers, some evidence was discovered; therefore, it is likely that this behavior takes place in other retail stores.

Another characteristic of a sales associate which may affect a plus-size consumer is their attractiveness, which refers to “the extent to which the service personnel is

perceived by the customer as possessing an appealing and pleasing physical appearance” (Ahearne, Gruen, & Jarvis, 1999, p. 270). While many mainstream retailers carry a variety of clothing sizes, looking at their sales associates, one may think differently. For instance, the retailer Abercrombie and Fitch who refers to its sales associates as “models”, and hires them because they resemble the images featured on their in-store signage. Abercrombie and Fitch believes that by using attractive sales associates as walking advertisements, they will sell more merchandise (Driessen, 2005). While it has been suggested that this strategy can be beneficial to retailers’, a study conducted by White suggests that an attractive sales associate may evoke feelings of jealousy, and competition, in women specifically (as cited in Murray & Price, 2009).

Chang (2009) reports that a study conducted by Murray and Price explored the affect that attractive sales associates have on consumers. The study, which was limited to young women between the ages of 18-26, found that consumers were less inclined to make purchases from attractive sales associates, which researchers explain by stating that “because young women feel tremendous pressure to be beautiful, the reaction to an attractive salesgirl is to avoid them and not buy the product” (Chang, 2009). This study suggests that “the solution lies in hiring women of all shapes and sizes, someone for each of your potential customers to relate to” (Chang, 2009). These findings signal that it is necessary to conduct more exploratory studies on sales associates and their effect on consumers. The current study will add to the literature that exists on this topic by exploring how plus-size consumers might be affected by sales associates while shopping in mainstream retail clothing stores.

## 2.6 Fitting Rooms

Fitting rooms are perhaps the most important part of a retail store because it is the place where consumers make their final purchasing decisions (Seo, 2012). Underhill indicates that women are more likely to try on clothes before making a purchase; however, many avoid fitting rooms because they feel negatively about themselves after trying on clothes (Hellmich, 2008; as cited in Hengevelt, 2014). A study by Tiggemann and Andrew supports this claim and suggests that “merchants might want to consider ways to mitigate the stress that their customers, especially overweight women, experience while trying on clothing in harshly lit, mirrored dressing rooms” (as cited in Allen, 2012). The current study will contribute to the existing information on fitting rooms and how they affect consumers purchase intentions by exploring how plus-size consumers may be effected.

Research by Seo (2013) proposes that the lighting and mirrors used in fitting rooms may cause dissatisfaction in consumers. First, this study indicated that mirrors in fitting rooms disable consumers from viewing their intended purchases from different angles. In addition, Wilson notes that “lighting sources are located above, which casts unattractive shadows on the shopper’s face” (as cited in Seo, 2013, p. 22). Henegevelt (2014) also suggests that the size of fitting rooms may cause dissatisfaction among consumers. This is because fitting rooms are typically small, about “3-feet-by-4½-feet”, which is impractical given that many consumers tend to shop in groups (Holmes & Smith, 2011).

So far, the information that exists on fitting rooms indicates that it may affect consumers purchase intentions. However, in order to determine the extent to which

consumers are affected, further exploratory research is needed on this topic. The current study will add to the literature by exploring how plus-size consumers are affected by fitting rooms in mainstream retail clothing stores.

## 2.7 Expectancy Disconfirmation Theory

Satisfaction is a consequence of how an individual perceives their experience (Oliver, 1997). Extensive research exists regarding consumers' satisfaction of product purchases and purchase intentions (e.g., Bantham, 2010; Bickle, Eckman & Kotsiopoulos, 1998; Ishida & Taylor, 2012; Taylor, 2012). While there are many different models, theories and definitions for the study of satisfaction, most, if not all, researchers agree that it begins with Oliver's work (1997). He provided a generalized definition in order to explain this term stating "satisfaction is the consumer's fulfillment response. It is a judgment that a product or service feature or the product or service itself, provided (or is providing) a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfillment, including levels of under-or over fulfillment" (p. 13).

The Expectancy Disconfirmation Model can be used to examine consumers' level of satisfaction with retail environments, because it can be used to explain consumer satisfaction (Lee & Gahring, 2008). The model proposes that the expectations of a consumer are impacted by an individual or a collection of contributing factors, referred to as vertical and horizontal distinctions. The vertical distinction is one event within a consumers shopping experience that affects them, while horizontal distinction involves concurring events that dictate a consumers satisfaction. Factors which may influence satisfaction include word of mouth, advertisement, product performance, visual cues and selling floor interactions with sales associates. (Oliver, 1997).

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

The methodology chapter will detail both the sampling method and instrument used to collect data for this study. It has been designed with the intent to measure store and human attributes in mainstream retail stores, which affect the level of satisfaction in plus-size female consumers. The following will be explained: (1) Objectives, (2) Hypotheses, (3) Sample, (4) Sampling Data and Collection, and (5) Theoretical Model

#### 3.1 Objectives

1. Examine attributes within a mainstream retail store environment that can affect the level of satisfaction experienced by plus-size women.
2. Analyze the growing demand among plus-size women in the United States for high quality and fashionable clothing.
3. Disseminate research findings.

#### 3.2 Hypotheses

H1: Store attributes will significantly influence a consumer's level of satisfaction with their shopping experience.

H1<sup>a</sup>. Spatial Crowding significantly influences consumers' level of satisfaction with their shopping experience.

H1<sup>b</sup>. Mannequins significantly influence consumers' level of satisfaction with their shopping experience.

H1<sup>c</sup>. Clothing Availability significantly influences consumers' level of satisfaction with their shopping experience.

H1<sup>d</sup>. In-Store signage significantly influences consumers' level of satisfaction with their shopping experience.

H1<sup>e</sup>. Fitting Rooms significantly influence a consumer's level of satisfaction with their shopping experience.

H2: Human attributes will significantly influence a consumer's level of satisfaction with their shopping experience.

H2<sup>a</sup>. Sales Associates significantly influence consumers' level of satisfaction with their shopping experience.

H2<sup>b</sup>. Human Crowding significantly influences consumers' level of satisfaction level of satisfaction with their shopping experience.

### 3.3 Sample

A nationwide random sample of 2,000 consumers was surveyed using panel data. C & T Marketing Group was employed to distribute the online survey to the plus-size female population. The use of panel data enables the researcher to accomplish the following objectives:

1. Obtain a large sample population (e.g., in excess of 1,500 respondents);
2. Survey plus-size females throughout the nation; and
3. Collect the data in a timely manner.

### 3.4 Sampling and Data Collection

Quantitative data was collected using an online survey to investigate the theoretical model of satisfaction with shopping. Refer to Figure 3.1. The survey consisted of three sections: (1) measurement of consumers' level of satisfaction with store attributes, (2) perception of store attributes and offerings, and (3) demographics.

Consumers' level of satisfaction with store attributes was measured using a five-point Likert type scale (1= very dissatisfied; 5= very satisfied). A rating of 0 was included for a category of "does not apply". Consumers' level of agreement (i.e., perceptions) with store attributes and offerings were measured using a five-point Likert type scale (1=strong disagree; 5=strongly agree). A rating of 0 was included for a category of "does not apply".

Demographic data were measured using categorical measures. Additionally, a question was included regarding clothing shopping behavior. This question was measured using an open-ended statement. Refer to Figure 3.1.

Principal component factor analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation was conducted on the satisfaction and perception statements. Variables with a correlation of .40 or higher were indicative of multicollinearity and thus deleted from the study (Hair, Anderson, & Tatham, 1987). Factors with an Eigen Value equal to or greater than 1.0 and variables loading .50 or greater were included in the analysis; these criteria were used throughout the study. Chronbach's Alpha was conducted on each factor. Factors with an alpha coefficient greater than .50 were used in the analysis (Touliatos & Compton, 1988).

### 3.5 Theoretical Model

Regression analysis was conducted to test the hypotheses. The factors identified from the PCA acted as independent variables. A PCA factor that identified as a level of satisfaction/dissatisfaction acted as the dependent variable.

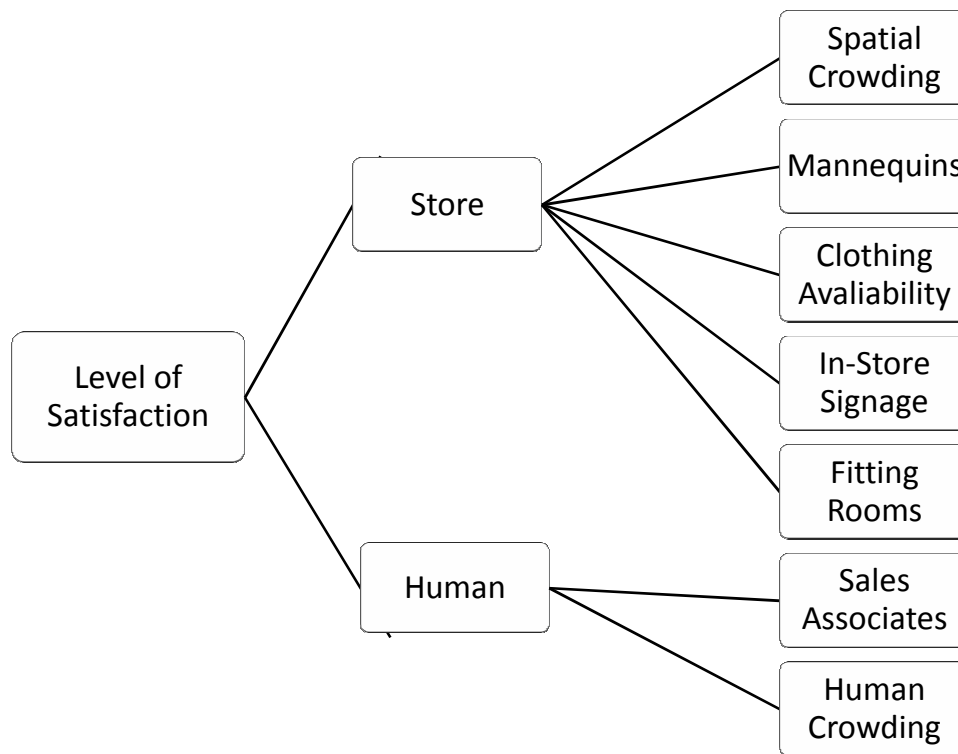


Figure 3.1 Theoretical Model of Satisfaction with Shopping



## CHAPTER FOUR

### ANALYSES

This chapter will provide detailed information about the following: (1) Demographics, (2) Data Reduction, and (3) Hypotheses Testing.

#### 4.1 Demographics

A total of 2,542 responses were collected for this study of those, 1,158 were used because they met the necessary criteria (i.e., women who wear a size 14 or larger). C&T Marketing Group administered this random nationwide survey and ensured that the responses were those of the intended sample. The respondents of this study were 18 years and older (Refer to Table 4.1). A plurality of the responses came from women between the ages of 56-60 (n=339) who accounted for 29.3%, 25.5% (n=296) were between the ages of 46-50, 25% (n=290) were between the ages of 26-40, 13.6% (n=158) were 66 years and older, and 6.5% (n=75) of the respondents were between the ages of 18-30.

Table 4.1:  
Demographics

Variable	N	%
Age		
18-30	75	6.5%
31-40	290	25%
46-55	296	25.5%
56-65	339	29.3%

66 and older	158	13.6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1158</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
<b>Household Income</b>		
Less than \$25,000	289	25%
\$25,000-\$40,000	304	26%
\$40,001-\$55,000	177	15%
\$55,001-\$70,000	137	12%
\$70,001-\$85,000	81	7%
\$85,001-\$100,000	65	6%
More than \$100,000	102	9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,155</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Amount spent on apparel per year</b>		
Less than \$100	253	21.8%
\$100-\$150	196	16.9%
\$151-\$200	147	12.7%
\$201-\$300	177	15.3%
\$300-\$400	109	9.4%
\$401-\$500	86	7.4%
\$501-\$600	59	5.1%
More than \$600	131	11.3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1158</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
<b>Dress Size</b>		
14	232	21%
16	242	21%
18	176	16%
20	96	9%
22	104	9%
24	75	7%
26	29	3%
28	8	1%
30-40	13	2%
Specialty Sizing (1x-6x)	52	5%
Wear multiple sizes (e.g., 14-16)	95	9%
Women's (w)	28	3%
Petite	2	.01
<b>Total</b>	<b>1152</b>	<b>100%</b>

Three of the 1,158 respondents in this study did not report their annual income. A plurality of the respondents reported an income between \$25,000 to \$40,000 per year (26%), 25% earned less than \$25,000 per year, 15% earned between \$40,001-\$55,000, 12% earned between \$55,001-\$70,000, 9% earned more than \$100,000, 7% earned between \$70,001-\$85,000, and 6% earned between \$85,001-\$100,000.

A plurality of the respondents reported that annually, they spend less than \$100 a year (21.8%) , 16.9% spent between \$100-\$150, 12.7% spent between \$151-\$200, 15.3% spent between \$201-\$300, 9.4% spent between \$300-\$400, 7.4% spent between \$401-\$500, 5.1% spent between \$501-600, and 11.3% spent more than \$600 per year. These numbers are artificially low, and a possible explanation for this is that the respondents were reluctant to answer this question or they misunderstood it.

Dress size was reported on 1,152 respondents. A plurality of the respondents wear a size 16 (21%), 21% wear a size 14, 16% wear a size 18, 9% wear a size 20, 9% wear a size 22, 7% wear a size 24, 3% wear a size 26, 1% wear a size 28, 2% wear a size 30-40, 5% wear specialty sizes, 9% wear multiple sizes, 3% wear women's sizes, and the petite sizes reported were statistically insignificant.

#### 4.2 Data Reduction

##### *Hypotheses 1<sup>a-f</sup>*

Prior to testing the hypotheses, data reduction was conducted using Principal Component Factor Analysis (PCA). PCA was conducted on both satisfaction with store environment and human environment variables. Prior to testing Hypothesis 1, stepwise regression with varimax rotation using an Eigen value of 1 was conducted on five variables associated with consumers' satisfaction with the store's environment. To be

included in the model, factors were required to load .45 or higher. Five factors were generated. The factor labeled Mannequin consisted of seven statements, and the first three asked about the level of satisfaction with mannequins. Sample statements included (a) mannequins in retail stores (b) proportions of the mannequins in stores, and (c) plus-size merchandise displayed on mannequins. The last four statements asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement. Sample statements included (d) most mannequins in stores represents my body type, (e) mannequins alter my opinion of the clothing brand offered in mainstream retail stores, (f) the posing style of a mannequin influences my purchase intentions, and (g) I can find clothing displayed on mannequins in my size. The factor labeled Spatial Crowding consisted of three statements. The first two statements asked about the level of satisfaction with spatial crowding. Sample statements included (a) fixtures and (b) atmosphere of clothing stores that carry my size merchandise. The last statement asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement. The sample statements asked (c) overall, I am satisfied by the clothing retail store environments. The factor labeled fitting rooms consisted of five statements. The first statement asked about the level of satisfaction with fitting rooms. The sample statement asked about the (a) ambience of fitting rooms. The last four statements asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement. Sample statements included (b) overall, I am satisfied with the fitting rooms offered by clothing retailers, (c) the size of fitting rooms accommodate me while shopping when shopping with a group, (d) the size of fitting rooms are adequate for my needs, and (e) fitting rooms lead to negative emotions regarding clothing fit. The factor labeled in-store signage consisted of seven statements. The first statement asked about the level of satisfaction with in-store signage. Sample statements included (a) store

signage. The last six statements asked about the level of agreement with in-store signage. Sample statements included (b) in-store advertisements influences my positive emotions, (c) in-store advertisements influence my purchase intentions, (d) models used in store advertisements look similar to me, (e) fat talk negatively influences my purchase intentions, (f) my body image affects my purchase intentions, and (g) self-perception affects my purchase intentions. The factor labeled clothing availability consisted of seven statements. The first statements asked about the level of satisfaction with clothing availability. Sample statements included (a) brand of plus-size merchandise offered and (b) overall, I am satisfied with mainstream retail stores that carry plus size apparel. The last five statements asked about the level of agreement with clothing availability. Sample questions included (c) I am able to find clothing in my size, (d) the fit of clothes influence my purchase intentions (e) I am able to find clothing that fit my body type, (f) overall, I am satisfied by the plus-size clothing offered by retailers, and (g) clothing fit matters more to me than how a fitting room looks.

### *Hypotheses 2<sup>a-b</sup>*

Prior to testing the hypotheses, data reduction was conducted using Principal Component Factor Analysis (PCA). Refer to Table 4.2. PCA was conducted on both satisfaction with store environment and human environment variables. Prior to testing Hypothesis 2, stepwise regression with varimax rotation using an Eigen value of 1 was conducted on two variables associated with consumers' satisfaction with the store's environment. To be included in the model, factors were required to load .45 or higher. Two factors were included in the model and were labeled Sales Associates and Human Crowding. Refer to Table 4.3. The factor label sales associates consisted of five

statements. The first statements asked about the level of satisfaction with sales associates. The sample statement asked about assistance with sales associates. The last four statements asked about the level of agreement with sales associates. The sample statements included (a) sales associates behavior influences my decision to shop in a store, (b) sales associates influence my purchase intentions, (c) overall, I am satisfied with the assistance of sales associates at clothing retailers, (d) the attitude of sales associates influences my purchase intentions, and (e) the service quality of sales associates influences my purchase intentions. The factor labeled human crowding consisted of three statements, all of which asked about the level of agreement with human crowding. Sample statements included (a) I like to shop when there are fewer customers in the store, (b) I am happier when the store is less crowded, and (c) when a store is crowded, I tend to spend less money.

Table 4.2

Principle Component Factor Analysis Results: Satisfaction with Store Environment

Factor and Sample Statement	Factor Loading	Eigen Value	Cumulative Percent of Variance	Cumulative Percent of Variance
Mannequins (4)		2.84	47.44%	47.44%
• Most mannequins in stores represent my body type	.84			
• I can find clothing displayed on mannequins in my size	.78			
• Satisfaction of plus-size merchandise on mannequins	.77			
• Satisfaction of mannequins in retail stores	.70			

Spatial Crowding (2)	.84	1.43	71.85%	71.85%
• When a store is crowded I spend less money				
• Crowded Fitting Rooms Lead to Dissatisfaction	.84			
Fitting Rooms(3)				
• Overall I am satisfied with the fitting rooms offered by clothing retailers	.88	2.11	52.75%	52.75%
• Satisfaction with ambiance of fitting rooms	.83	1.00	25.09%	77.84%
• The size of fitting rooms accommodate me while shopping with a group	.79			
In-Store Signage (2)				
• Satisfaction with store signage	.73	1.07	53.86%	53.86%
• In store advertising evokes the need to compare myself to others	.73			
Clothing Availability (3)				
• I am readily able to merchandise in my size	.82	2.31	77.12%	77.12%
• I am able to find clothing that fit my body type	.80			
• Assortment of plus-size merchandise	.68			

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( ) Indicates the number of statement included in the factor

Table 4.3

Satisfaction with Human Environment				
Factor and Sample Statement	Factor Loading	Eigen Value	Cumulative Percent of Variance	Cumulative Percent of Variance
<u>Sales Help (2)</u>				
• I am satisfied with the sales associates at clothing retailers	.89	1.79	44.84%	44.84%
• Satisfaction from sales associates	.88			
<u>Sales Influence (2)</u>				
• The behavior of sales associates influence my decision to shop in a store	.86	1.25	31.38%	76.19%
• Sales associates influence my purchase intentions	.81			
<u>Human Crowding (3)</u>				
• I like to shop when there are fewer people in the store	.89	2.55	63.78%	63.78%
• I am happiest when the store has few people	.89			
• When a store is crowded I tend to spend less money	.78			

( ) Indicates the number of statement included in the factor

#### 4.3 Hypotheses Testing

H1: Store attributes will significantly influence plus-size consumers' level of satisfaction with mainstream retail clothing stores

Stepwise regression analysis with varimax rotation was conducted to test H1. The dependent variable was plus-size consumers' level of satisfaction with mainstream retail clothing stores that carry plus size apparel. The independent variables included the clothing availability, spatial crowding, ambiance of fitting rooms, mannequins, and in-store signage factors. Results of the analysis revealed clothing to be the single most significant predictor of plus-size consumers' satisfaction with mainstream retail clothing



stores that carry plus size apparel ( $F = 945.82$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Refer to Table 4.4. Spatial crowding was the second most significant predictor of overall satisfaction ( $F = 529.04$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Two additional significant predictors of overall satisfaction with mainstream retail clothing stores that carry plus size apparel, were ambiance of fitting rooms ( $F = 364.11$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) and mannequins ( $F = 275.48$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Hypothesis 1<sup>a-f</sup> are supported.

Table 4.4

Stepwise Regression – Level of Satisfaction with Mainstream Clothing Stores’ Plus-Size Apparel Options

Model	R	R Square	Sum of Square	df	Mean Square	F
Regression	.67	.44	1583.36	1	1583.36	945.82* <sup>a</sup>
Residual			1945.26	1162	1.67	
Total			3528.62	1163		
Regression	.69	.47	1682.48	2	841.244	529.04* <sup>b</sup>
Residual			1846.134	1161	1.59	
Total			3528.621	1163		
Regression	.69	.48	1711.318	3	570.43	364.11* <sup>c</sup>
Residual			1817.303	1160	1.56	
Total			3528.621	1163		
Regression	.69	.48	1719.792	4	429.94	275.48* <sup>d</sup>
Residual			1808.829	1159	1.56	
Total			3528.621	1163		

$P < .001$

Dependent Variable: Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: overall I am satisfied with mainstream retail clothing stores that carry plus size apparel

- a. Independent variable: Clothing
- b. Independent variable: Clothing, spatial crowding
- c. Independent variable: Clothing, spatial crowding, ambiance of fitting rooms
- d. Independent variable: Clothing, spatial crowding, ambiance of fitting rooms, and mannequins

H2: Human attributes will significantly influence plus-size consumers’ level of satisfaction with mainstream retail clothing stores

Stepwise regression analysis with varimax rotation was conducted to test H2. The dependent variable was plus-size consumers' level of satisfaction with mainstream retail clothing stores that carry plus size apparel. The independent variables included sales associates and human crowding. Results of the analysis revealed that plus size consumers ranked sales associates as the most significant predictor of their satisfaction with mainstream retail clothing stores and human crowding as the second most important ( $F = 145.67$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Refer to Table 4.5. Human Crowding was the second most significant predictor of overall satisfaction ( $F = 96.79$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Hypothesis 2<sup>a-b</sup> are supported.

Table 4.5

Stepwise Regression – Level of Satisfaction with Mainstream Clothing Stores' Sales Associates and Human Crowding

Model	R	R Square	Sum of Square	df	Mean Square	F
Regression	.33	.11	391.91	1	391.91 2.67	145.67 <sup>*a</sup>
Residual			3118.00	1159		
Total			3509.92	1160		
Regression	.37	.14	502.73	2	251.36 2.59	96.79 <sup>*b</sup>
Residual			3007.18	1158		
Total			3509.92	1160		

\* $p < 0.001$

Dependent Variable: Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: overall I am satisfied with mainstream retail clothing stores that carry plus size apparel

a. Independent variable: Sales Associates

b. Independent variable: Predictor: Sales Associates, Human Crowding

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter will present the following sections (1) Discussion, (2) Conclusion, (3) Limitations, and (4) Recommendations

#### 5.1 Discussion

This study, which examined attributes of mainstream retail clothing stores that affect the level of satisfaction and dissatisfaction in plus-size female consumers, responds to the lack of scientific research on how plus-size consumers feel about clothing and what influences their shopping. This demographic becoming more important to retailers by the very fact that the average size of American women is 14. Despite the fact that there are so many plus-size women in the U.S., retailers do not have an accurate understanding of what they want in clothing and how they feel toward the shopping environment. This study attempted to investigate the plus-size female consumers' attitudes toward clothing and shopping in mainstream retail clothing stores.

The two hypotheses in this study were analyzed using Stepwise Regression Analysis. Hypothesis 1 measured the influence store attributes had on plus-size consumers' level of satisfaction with their shopping experience. The dependent variable was satisfaction with the shopping experience. Independent variables were: (a) clothing availability, (b) spatial crowding, (c) ambiance of fitting rooms, (d) mannequins, and (e) in-store signage. Results of the analysis revealed that all independent variables, with the

exception of in-store signage, were significant predictors of consumers' satisfaction with their shopping experience.

Clothing availability was the most important predictor of plus-size consumers' shopping experience in mainstream retail clothing stores. This supports a survey conducted by the NPD Group (2012) which found that plus-size women are dissatisfied with the style and quality of clothing available. The current study is also consistent with the findings in a Mintel market research report (2012), which found that among retailers that do provide clothing options for plus-size consumers, many customers still feel that they cater specifically to consumers who are not plus-size.

Spatial Crowding was the second most important predictor in plus-size consumers' shopping experience in mainstream retail clothing stores. This finding is in line with research by Kazakeviciute and Banyte (2012), who identified two types of crowding, spatial and human, which influenced a consumer's satisfaction with a retail store. The current study also supports research by Li, Kim and Lee (2009) which suggested that retailers must provide a store layout which will allow consumers to "navigate and shop easily" (p. 639). Our findings also align with a study by Owen (2012), which examined the daily lives of obese people and found that they experience difficulties while out in public because many public places do not accommodate their size (Owen, 2012).

Fitting Rooms were the third most important predictor of plus-size consumers' shopping experience in mainstream retail clothing stores. Few studies have examined fitting rooms; however, exploratory research by Seo (2013) and Hengevelt (2014) suggested that lighting, mirrors, and the size of fitting rooms affect consumers purchase

intentions. The current study also supports research by Tiggemann and Andrew which suggested that retailers should be mindful of the affect that fitting rooms can have on female consumers, specifically those who are overweight (as cited in Allen, 2012).

Mannequins were the fourth most important predictor of a plus-size consumers' shopping experience in mainstream retail clothing stores. So far, only exploratory research (e.g., Fister, 2009; Meidierks-Lenham, 2007) has been conducted on mannequins, but the information that has been found aligns with the current study which indicates that consumers are influenced by mannequin displays. In a survey that was conducted by the NPD Group, researchers found that "Forty-two percent of customers say something on a mannequin influences whether they buy it" (as cited in D'Innocenzio, 2014). The current study also supports a publication by Meidierks-Lenham (2007) which indicated that mannequins reflect "body image trends" in society, which can be damaging to the self-esteem of young women.

In-store signage was also examined in this study, and while it has been suggested that it may affect consumers with low body esteem, our results did not support that finding (Dahl et al., 2012).

Hypothesis 2 measured the influence human attributes had on plus-size consumers' level of satisfaction with their shopping experience. The dependent variable was satisfaction with the shopping experience and the independent variables were: (a) sales associates and (b) human crowding. Results of the analysis revealed that both independent variables were significant predictors of plus-size consumers' satisfaction with the shopping experience.

Sales Associates ranked highest on a plus-size consumers' level of satisfaction with their shopping experience in mainstream retail clothing stores. This supports a study by Cho (2011) which showed that sales associates affect the purchase intentions of consumers. The current study also provides support for a Rice University study, which showed that plus-size consumers experienced subtle forms of discrimination from sales associates which included "less eye contact, more rudeness, hostility and unfriendliness" (as cited in Lozano, 2005)

Human crowding was the second most important predictor in plus-size consumers' shopping experience in mainstream retail clothing stores. This confirms research by Byun and Mann (2011) in their findings which show that human crowding elicits negative emotions such as "anger, irritation, and sadness" in consumers (p.286). Machleit et al. (2000), also suggested that human crowding may elicit "feelings of shyness (or shame)" when a person feels that the attention in a crowded environment has been directed toward them (p. 31). Few studies have investigated how plus-size consumers are directly affected by human crowding. A study conducted by Owen (2012) provides a logical explanation of how plus-size consumers may be effected while shopping in a retail clothing store. This study collected information on overweight or obese individuals, one of whom noted that the difficult thing about shopping in general is hearing discriminatory comments from others. While the current study seems to support Owen's (2012) theory consumers who are obese are affected by human crowding in a retail store, additional research is needed in order to indicate the extent to which they are effected.

The findings of the current study disclose attributes in retail stores that affect plus-size consumers' level of satisfaction while shopping in mainstream retail clothing stores. Few studies have focused on plus-size women in the United States, even though Binkley (2011) notes that this demographic holds "28% of the purchasing power in the United States, though only spend 17%". Some important information that this study found, which would be of interest to retailers, is that a great amount of respondents (22%) wear a size 14 (i.e., this is the average clothing size worn by U.S. women and considered plus-size). This statement is supported by the NPD Group which found "that more than 30% of the female population purchases at least some plus-size clothing items" (as cited in Meng, 2007, p.14).

It appears that the retail industry has placed a large emphasis on the atmospherics, of a retail store which Gillani (2012) indicates is important because it can affect a consumers' purchase intention. However, store atmospherics should come secondary to clothing availability, which for plus-size consumers obtaining clothing that fits and is fashionable is the ultimate goal and sometimes unachievable.

## 5.2 Conclusion

This exploratory study, which consisted of 1,158 plus-size women indicates, that clothing availability has the most significant impact on their level of satisfaction with mainstream retail clothing stores. One of the most important things about this study is that it shows that plus-size women are no different than standard size women when it comes to shopping. For instance, both groups desire to purchase clothing that is fashionable and fits properly. However for plus-size consumers, it is more difficult to purchase clothing because retailers believe that this demographic does not spend money

on clothes and are not into fashion (Wilson, 2011). This belief is demonstrated in the clothing selection offered in stores for this demographic. When clothes are available, they are typically offered by discount retailers, offered in a limited selection, or when offered by upscale retailers they have a very high price tag. Other than clothing, aspects within a store environment, such as mannequins that do not represent their body type and sales associates who discriminate against them because of their size, adds to the dissatisfaction that plus-size women feel while shopping. For retailers, the most important thing to take away from this study is that plus-size consumers want a shopping experience that is equivalent to consumers who are not plus-size. Therefore, providing a shopping environment that is favorable to all potential consumers is the best solution and is one that may prove to be a lucrative venture.

### 5.3 Limitations

This study strongly suggests that the plus-size demographic in America is underserved and dissatisfied with retailers, though there are some limitations which should be addressed. First, some of the attributes explored in this study such as fitting rooms, in-store signage, and sales associates have received a minimal amount of attention in the literature and because of this it was difficult to find evidence on how they affect plus-size consumers. Finally, a majority of the respondents who participated in this survey were over the age of 40, which may not apply to some retailers target market.

### 5.4 Recommendations

Because the amount of overweight and obese Americans continue to rise, there are a number of studies that could be conducted on this demographic and their shopping behaviors. First, there is still much research to be conducted on plus-size female



consumers, as the information available on their shopping behaviors is limited. Second, a study could explore how retailers, that are popular among the teen demographic, affect plus-size teens. This information would be useful to retailers who may want to expand their clothing selection to include plus-sizes.

Finally, study could explore overweight and obese male consumers who in the retail industry are referred to as “big and tall”. There is a minimal amount of information on this demographic, though a study by Shim & Kotsiopulos “found that in general, big and tall men were dissatisfied consumers, ‘especially concerning fit, variety in store, and style selections’ ” (as cited in Brosdahl & Carpenter, 2012, p. 548). Because these findings were quoted from older study (1991), it is possible that the clothing preferences of big and tall male consumers has changed. Therefore, it would be useful to conduct this study again.

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## APPENDIX A

### PLUS-SIZE SATISFACTION SURVEY

This survey measures level of satisfaction and perceptions regarding brick-and-mortar retailers.

<b>Please indicate the <u>level of satisfaction</u> you are with the following statements.</b>	<b>Very Dissatisfied</b>	<b>Dissatisfied</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Satisfied</b>	<b>Very Satisfied</b>	<b>Not Applicable</b>
Mannequins in retail stores	1	2	3	4	5	0
Proportions of the mannequins in stores	1	2	3	4	5	0
Plus-size merchandise displayed on mannequins	1	2	3	4	5	0
Brand of plus-size merchandise offered	1	2	3	4	5	0
Assistance with sales associates	1	2	3	4	5	0
Ambiance of fitting rooms	1	2	3	4	5	0
Atmosphere of clothing stores that carry my size merchandise	1	2	3	4	5	0
Store signage	1	2	3	4	5	0
Fixtures	1	2	3	4	5	0
Overall, I am satisfied with mainstream stores that carry plus size apparel	1	2	3	4	5	0
<b>Please indicate the <u>level of agreement</u> with the following statements.</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Not Applicable</b>
Most mannequins in stores represents my body type	1	2	3	4	5	0
Mannequins alter my opinion of the clothing brand offered in mainstream retail stores	1	2	3	4	5	0

The posing style of a mannequin influences my purchase intentions	1	2	3	4	5	0
I can find clothing displayed on mannequins in my size	1	2	3	4	5	0
I like to shop when there are fewer customers in the store	1	2	3	4	5	0
I am happier when the store is less crowded	1	2	3	4	5	0
When a store is crowded, I tend to spend less money	1	2	3	4	5	0
I have a good perception of myself	1	2	3	4	5	0
Sales associates behavior influence my decision to shop in a store	1	2	3	4	5	0
I am able to find clothing in my size	1	2	3	4	5	0
Overall, I am satisfied with the fitting rooms offered by clothing retailers	1	2	3	4	5	0
The fit of clothes influence my purchase intentions	1	2	3	4	5	0
I am able to find clothing that fit my body type	1	2	3	4	5	0
The size of fitting rooms accommodate me while shopping when shopping with a group	1	2	3	4	5	0
The size of fitting rooms are adequate for my needs	1	2	3	4	5	0
Overall, I am satisfied by the plus-size clothing offered by retailers	1	2	3	4	5	0
Clothing fit matters more to me than how a dressing room looks	1	2	3	4	5	0
Fitting rooms lead to negative emotions regarding clothing fit	1	2	3	4	5	0
Models used in in-store advertisements influence my shopping intentions	1	2	3	4	5	0
In-store advertisements evokes the need to compare myself to others	1	2	3	4	5	0
Overall, I am satisfied by the clothing retail store environments	1	2	3	4	5	0

In-store advertisements influences my positive emotions	1	2	3	4	5	0
In-store advertisements influence my purchase intentions	1	2	3	4	5	0
Models used in store advertisements look similar to me	1	2	3	4	5	0
Fat talk negatively influences my purchase intentions	1	2	3	4	5	0
Sales associates influence my purchase intentions	1	2	3	4	5	0
Overall, I am satisfied with the assistance of sales associates at clothing retailers	1	2	3	4	5	0
The attitude of sales associates influence my purchase intentions	1	2	3	4	5	0
The service quality of sales associates influence my purchase intentions	1	2	3	4	5	0
My body image affects my purchase intentions	1	2	3	4	5	0
Self-perception affects my purchase intentions	1	2	3	4	5	0

What is your age range? :

Under 18	46-50
18-25	51-55
26-30	56-60
31-40	61-65
41-45	66 or older

What dress size do you wear? \_\_\_\_\_

On average, how much do you spend on clothing per year?

Less than \$100	\$501-\$600
\$101-\$150	\$601-\$700
\$151-\$200	\$701-\$800
\$201-\$300	\$801-\$900
\$301-\$400	\$901-\$1000
\$401-\$500	More than \$1000

What is the annual household income before taxes?

Less than \$24,999	\$70,001-\$85,000
\$25,000-\$40,000	\$85,001-\$100,000
\$45,001-\$55,000	More than \$100,000
\$55,001-\$70,00	